The Empty Space Study Guide

The Empty Space by Peter Brook

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Plot Summary

The Empty Space is composed of a series of lectures on the subject of theatre written and delivered by noted British director and producer Peter Brook in the late 1960s. The lectures explore the nature and purpose of the theatre, examine aspects of contemporary theatre production and philosophy that prevent the theatre from fulfilling its purpose most effectively, and discuss ways in which theatre might (must?) change in order for that purpose to be fully realized. Central to the author's thematic point is the contention that the fundamental reason theater exists is to awaken in an audience an understanding of the human condition they were previously unable, or unwilling, to apprehend.

Each lecture in the book examines an aspect and/or a manifestation of theatre's core function and intent, as well as ways in which contemporary theatre creation prevents both from being fully realized. At the beginning of the first lecture, on "The Deadly Theatre", the author offers an explanation of the concept of "the empty space"—it is, in his view, a term for any venue in which theatre takes place. As illustration, he offers experiences of having seen theatre in plush London commercial venues, Broadway, renovated churches, bombed out ballrooms in Germany, and even people's living rooms. Theatre, he suggests, takes place in any "empty space" where one (or more) individual(s) watches other individual(s) recreate life with the intent of illuminating its meaning—or at least an aspect of its meaning. He then presents several theories about how and why theatre, in whatever "empty space" it's presented, either succeeds or fails in fulfilling that intent.

The first essay examines in depth the nature of what the author defines as "The Deadly Theatre", or theatre that is essentially dull and un-engaging. This sort of theatre, he suggests, is defined by passivity—of creators, of interpreters (actors, directors), and of audiences. Nothing happens on stage to fully and challengingly engage an audience; therefore, an audience is not engaged at all. The second essay examines "The Holy Theatre", or theatre which, in the author's perspective, is more concerned with spiritual, higher values that ultimately are removed from an audience's day-to-day experience, and are therefore un-engaging.

The third essay, "The Rough Theatre", explores techniques that the author suggests could be employed by both "The Deadly Theatre" and "The Holy Theatre" to awaken audiences to theater's potential power and insight. These techniques, he suggests, are based in spontaneity, impulse, and raw emotional expression. There is a danger, he suggests, in relying too much on "the rough theatre", with too much emphasis on its values leading to a lack of depth, shallow meaning, and theatre of sensation rather than insight. For insight to be gained, he writes, the best aspects of "the rough theatre" must be combined with the best of "the holy theatre", with such a combination offering the possibility of enlightenment through an examination of incidents of sensation grounded in episodes from daily life. This combination, he maintains, was and is most ideally expressed in the works of William Shakespeare. He offers several examples of how

Shakespeare achieved this alchemy, and of how that alchemy has proved transcendently effective over the centuries since the plays were first written.

This alchemy, or rather what the author sees as alchemy, is further defined in the final essay of the book, "The Immediate Theatre". This, in the author's perspective, is theatre that combines the rough and the holy in an experience that brings illumination of human truth and experience to an audience in an immediate, visceral, sometimes sub-conscious but always revelatory way. This essay explores several techniques potentially employable by theatre practitioners of all disciplines (creators, actors, directors and critics) in order to make theatre both personally and societally relevant. Application of these techniques, he concludes, will also serve both theatre and society in terms of keeping theater evolving—for as life changes, so does the experience of, and the potential for connecting with, deeper human truth as portrayed (by practitioners) and experienced (by audiences).

The Deadly Theatre, part 1 (pp. 11-30)

The Deadly Theatre, part 1 (pp. 11-30) Summary and Analysis

The author suggest that successful theatre is not of vibrant sensation and/or over-stimulation of the senses and emotions, but theatre in which members of an audience become emotionally and spiritually involved with "the man [walking] across the empty space." Theatre that doesn't function to connect with its audience is "deadly" theatre—theatre of dullness; in short, "deadly" theatre is theatre that, in his definition, is simply "bad".

Two qualities create deadly theatre: lack of human honesty in the production and lack of openness to that honesty in an audience. Both are the result of people doing things for the wrong reason, such as productions created solely to make money, managers who are too budget conscious, and/or audiences who come to the theatre for reasons other than wanting to be engaged and/or moved. He suggests that for theatre to be successful it must allow change. The language of communication is constantly changing. The words and works of Shakespeare must reveal contemporary truth and connect with contemporary audiences while also maintaining integrity with the original creative impulse. Replication of mannerin both content and performance is not enough. Theatre must constantly reinvent itself and its audience, but theatre must not make itself less in order to do so. Theatre and audiences alike share in a common desire too dig into the mysterious experience of being human.

This author is innovative, almost radical, in perspective, especially for the mid-to-late 1960s. At that point, conservatism was still in vogue and theatre was expected to behave in certain ways. The author's perspectives were quite a change from prevailing thinking, although, remember, what was accepted then was radical in another era. The author is advocating a continuation of the process of evolution. Theatre must change according to the equally changeable needs of the society. The author makes no concrete statement as to who, individual or group, is best qualified to judge what those needs might be and/or how best to fill them. He says that theatre's ultimate function and purpose is to awaken both practitioners and audiences to new and deeper understandings of human truth. The "deadly" theatre, in his perspective, fails in achieving that goal.

The Deadly Theatre, part 2 (p. 30-46)

The Deadly Theatre, part 2 (p. 30-46) Summary and Analysis

The author discusses the role, responsibilities, and impact of the actor, critic, dramatist, and director in both the creation of theatre in general and the creation of deadly theatre in particular. The actor is often a "deadly" actor by the very nature of his profession. Typecasting, the actor's fragile ego, the nature of the acting process, and limited opportunities for actors to actually practice and/or update their skills create "deadly" actors.

The critic has a more important and positive role in defining theatre than he is given credit for. The critic must call for competence and guide the way to theatre's evolution, thus steering the theatre away from deadliness. The critic must love theatre, be critically clear about what theatre must do, and be prepared to examine his/her own belief systems.

The playwright's job is the most difficult. The playwright must connect with and understand all the characters. The playwright must understand the truths of all the characters, have some understanding of the themes of the play, and do it all limited by the medium of words. The playwright must do this so well, that the actor, critic, director, and audience clearly understand his/her intent.

The director's responsibility is to oversee the process of bringing the play's truths to life by ensuring those truths are clearly evident, that the truths are conveyed in ways that are comprehensible to the audience, and making sure the conveyance is connected to the changing social, intellectual, and emotional condition of the day.

Though not all productions need be this "heavy" theatre can only truly live and evolve if those who create it and those who watch it both ask themselves why they participate in theatre. This section defines the practical heart of the book's theoretical perspective—that theatre exists to awaken and be awakened to new perspectives on human experience. The author says is it is the responsibility of all four components of theatre to make this happen.

It is noteworthy that the author includes the critic as a theatre professional, as the critic is usually regarded as an enemy, rather than an ally. The relationship of critic to the theatre is complicated, given the subjectivity of theatre production when critics are theoretically more objective, but just such objectivity can be good .

The author's reference to theatre as entertainment may be suggesting that experiences of laughter and pleasure can be just as transcendently human as those which bring to light what might be described as deeper, darker truths.

The Holy Theatre, part 1 (p 47 to 61)

The Holy Theatre, part 1 (p 47 to 61) Summary and Analysis

The author begins this essay with the comment that The Holy Theatre "could also be called The Theatre of the Invisible-Made-Visible: the notion that the stage is a place where the invisible can appear has a deep hold on our thoughts". He goes on to suggest that this notion can be found in connection to almost all forms of art (see "Quotes", p. 47), adding that a hunger for some kind of connection to that invisible world/life is one of the reasons why people become audiences to art (not just theatre). Ritual, and by extension art, only works when it nourishingly evokes both aspects of existence (contemporary experience and universal truth). Only then can it can effectively be described as "holy." "Holy" doesn't necessarily mean serious—joy and celebration can trigger reverence, contemplation, and awakening to the potential darkness of the human condition. Neither making an audience laugh or shudder is enough; there must be some kind of deeper insight. The question, of course, is how does a theatre practitioner know when that's happened? Defining that could be the job of the critic .

"Theatre of Cruelty" was theatre of sensation, of impulse, of dedication to triggering sudden, searing insights into the human condition. It was theatre of mercilessness—theatre defined by its relentless pursuit of insight into what makes a human being a human being, and of what makes it possible for that human being's experience to transcend the individual and become emblematic (archetypal?) to all humanity.

The Holy Theatre, part 2 (p 61-72)

The Holy Theatre, part 2 (p 61-72) Summary and Analysis

"The Happening" is a theatrical experience that is just that—an experience. There are no definitions, no boundaries. It offers a considerable challenge to both its creators and to those who observe it, in that for meaning to exist there must be some understanding somewhere of how the experience is to be used. "Those of us who work in theatre", he writes, "are implicitly challenged to go ahead to meet that [holy] hunger." He then explores at some length the work and intent of three artists determined to find new ways to do just that.

The first artist is American dancer and choreographer Merce Cunningham, whose work focuses on the impulses, from the most consuming to the most apparently insignificant, that trigger further movement and further impulses, which in turn trigger further movement, and so on. The second is playwright Samuel Beckett, whose plays contain what may look like extreme and absurd symbols but which are idiosyncratic but deeply archetypal expressions of universal human conditions and, as such, are expressive, even in their extremity, of something holy. The third artist noted here is Polish director Jerzy Grotowski, in whose work the actor performs a function similar to that of a priest—leading those who participate in his "rituals" into a deeper understanding of their identity as living, spiritual beings. The companies led by these three artists are both limited in scope and audience. Next the author writes of "The Living Theatre," who are searching for holiness without a tradition to anchor it. On the other hand, Shakespeare found the balance of external (language, action) and internal (awareness of larger spiritual truth) that makes his work the universal, transcendently accessible art that good productions of his plays can become.

The author concludes this essay with a reference to Haitian voodoo, in which priest-led ritual enables ordinary human beings to become connected with/possessed by the spirits of the gods, thereby making it possible to connect with the gods on an earthly, comprehensible, intimate level. In the past, actors have been revered and treated as gods. Was this reverence, or fear that what they brought into life might be too bright, too powerful, too revealing of nature to be comfortable and safe? The question for theatre practitioners and audiences alike is to determine where best to find that sort of theatre —"in the clouds or on the ground?"

What is perceived to happen in the course of a voodoo possession (the gods inhabit man in order to communicate more effectively) can be seen as a description of what happens in a theatre experience (holy truths inhabit, or are portrayed by, actors in order to communicate transcendent truths more effectively). Cunningham, Beckett, Grotowski, and even William Shakespeare can be seen to perform the function of voodoo priests. The same point could also be made in relation to the work of Bertolt Brecht, the German theatre practitioner.

It's also possible to come to a fuller understanding of what the author means by "The Happening." In the same way as ordinary humans become "possessed" during a voodoo ritual, during a "Happening," theatre practitioners and audience members alike can become "possessed" by a new and transcendent experience of "holy" human truth. The author describes techniques that can bring about not just an individual happening but a theatre event.

The author describes potential limitations of theatre that focuses on "Happenings" and/or on the "Holy." He describes ways in which these limitations can be expressed, perhaps even transcended, in the following two essays, on the "Rough" and "Immediate" forms of theatre.

The Rough Theatre, part 1 (p. 73 to 92)

The Rough Theatre, part 1 (p. 73 to 92) Summary and Analysis

The author begins this essay with an analysis of the difference between theatre staged in formal, traditional settings and theatre that takes place in less formal, often dirty, less official settings. He describes the latter as freer, often truer to the spirit of the people, more instinctive, and more energized. It's also the energy of comedy; the energy of revolution, of change, and transformation; and the energy of delight and irresponsibility. He paints a vivid contrast between The Rough Theatre and The Holy Theatre. "The Holy Theatre deals with the invisible and this invisible contains all the hidden impulses of man. The Rough Theatre deals with men's actions, and because it is down to earth and direct...the rough and ready seems better than the hollowly holy.". He then begins a detailed analysis of the work and intent of German playwright Bertolt Brecht, which he suggests is thoroughly grounded in "Rough Theatre" and embodies many of its virtues.

Brecht developed a theatre based on a style known as "alienation," a process which is intended to pare away layers of sentimentality and emotion to bring about an honest and deeper realization of the human condition. He comments that there is a degree of similarity between alienation and "the happening." The happening exists to awaken audiences to their subjective emotions; alienation, on the other hand, exists to awaken audiences to the objective truths of the society around them. To illustrate his point, he offers several examples of dramatic artists other than Brecht who employ alienation techniques, explores examples of techniques and why they're successful, and comments at length on the different ways of thinking an actor must develop in order to successfully embody and dramatize alienation's purpose. The author also analyzes Brecht in the context of other dramatists like Chekhov and Shakespeare. At times, alienation's intense focus on societal commentary can, when imposed upon more humanist works, push those works into manifestations of truth other than what the original playwright intended.

There is the very strong sense that the author believes that the best of Brecht's work is the best kind of theatre, a blend of rough and holy that in its own way is as effective as that practiced by Shakespeare. Brecht and Shakespere ultimately both fulfill the purpose of theatre with similar dedication, skill, and talent. Brecht and his theatre view humanity and its relationship to society only from a certain, rigorously defined, socialist/leftist perspective and can become lecture-like, automatic, and judgmental. Shakespeare, by contrast, was never judgmental in the author's perspective. His work presents all humanity in all its flawed wonder.

Here again is another reminder of the author's belief that laughter and lightness can be as enlightening and/or trigger as much insight as seriousness and intensity. The author likens the energy of laughter to the energy of revolution, calling them free, empowering,

almost anarchic in their effect on the human spirit, and ultimately in their similarity just as likely to trigger not only awareness but also action in response to that awareness.

The Rough Theatre, part 2 (p. 93 to 109)

The Rough Theatre, part 2 (p. 93 to 109) Summary and Analysis

The author comments on how effective, socially engaged theatre in various cultures around the world seems to be "rough theatre"—theatre about change in cultures desperate for change whether that culture is conscious of that desperation or not. The challenge of theatre, in that context, is to address its relationship with society and ask itself what do the people want liberation from, and in what way that liberation should proceed.

In his consideration of Shakespeare's work the author suggests that Shakespeare's answer to the question of what people want in theatre can be found in the way the plays juxtapose the rough and the holy. In Shakespeare, the juxtaposition of rough and holy has parallels in those between poetry and prose, between short/fast/sensational scenes and long/slow/deep scenes, and between thematic elements (virginity/sexuality, mercy/condemnation, death/life). He cites the play Measure for Measure for examples of these juxtapositions, and later writes about The Winter's Tale to show how a point about how a formal repetition of form (the holy) juxtaposes with a sudden, apparently mystical "happening" (the rough) to illustrate how the illogical suddenly breaks open the world of the expected to reveal a transcendent, humanist truth. This is in fact an example of "The Immediate Theatre", explored and defined in depth in the following essay.

The author believes that in contemporary theatre, the rough is the most accessible way to find "holiness," but adds that it's up to contemporary theatre practitioners to compel audience attention and belief without resorting to fancy, stagy tricks.

The author's examination of the work and intent of Shakespeare's writings doesn't actually address the question of liberation—what humanity needs to be liberated from and how that liberation can come about. That, it seems, is the Brechtian perspective on the function of theatre—that the human spirit must strive for liberation, in whatever form it takes, from the constrictions of a non-humanist society. The author seems to infer that Shakespeare writes from a place of believing that the human condition is already one of freedom—the presence of the rough in his plays seems, in the author's view, to make that suggestion. Perhaps the source of conflict in Shakespeare's work—the tension between the rough and the holy, and the struggle to balance the way an experience of one can lead to an understanding of/insight into the other. It could be argued that Brecht's plays also dramatize that tension. However, it could also be argued that Brecht writes from a place of believing there can be no value at all in the holy. The rough-based struggle for freedom, respect, and recognition seems, for Brecht, to be the defining factor in his experience of theatre. The irony, of course, is that without apparent intention on Brecht's part, he's invoking the holy anyway, for what are freedom, respect, and recognition if not expressions of transcendent human experiences?

The Immediate Theatre, part 1 (p 110 to 134)

The Immediate Theatre, part 1 (p 110 to 134) Summary and Analysis

The author begins this essay with commentary on theatre's uniqueness in the world of art in general, and in its relationship to the apparently similar narrative art of the cinema in particular. "The cinema", he writes, "flashes on to a screen images from the past. As this is what the mind does to itself all through life, the cinema seems intimately real . . . the theatre, on the other hand, always asserts itself in the present. This is what can make it more real than the normal stream of consciousness. This also is what can make it so disturbing". He then prefaces the next section of this essay with the comment that what he's about to speak of is entirely subjective and based on his own personal experience creating theatre. Anyone reading the book, he suggests, and looking for his/her own ways of creating and/or understanding theatre, must not look at what he's about to say as rules, but only commentary on an individual experience. The theatre artist, he adds, must find his/her own experience in order to create both his/her own understanding of theatre, and his/her own theatre.

The second section of this essay focuses on the different ways plays in rehearsal develop both their understanding and their manifestation of meaning. The author begins with an analysis of the relationship between the director, the play, and the designer, concluding that ultimately the best design (of sets, costumes, lights, and props) is one that evolves along with the production at the same time as the rehearsal process. Productions in which designs are decided upon before rehearsals even begin, the author suggests, result in deadly theatre that doesn't come to life in the way he believes theatre must. He then discusses the role and responsibility of the director, and here his conclusion is similar to that he drew when discussing design—after offering a series of personal anecdotes about his own directorial experience, he suggests that direction of a play functions most fully and truthfully when it is only partially preplanned. A director, he contends, must have some idea of the play's meaning and how that meaning is to be communicated, but ultimately because theatre is a collaborative art, meaning only comes to full fruition as the result of a combination of efforts from a number of individuals. These individuals, he continues, include director, actor, designer, and dramatist, whose efforts manifest meaning in the immediate moment of the rehearsal room, as opposed to having been decided upon the night before. In the same vein, performances, he writes, become fully effective and full of meaning only when that sense of in-the-moment inspiration is allowed to emerge from within the framework of that which has been rehearsed, shaped, and structured.

Analysis of the director's role leads to analysis of the actors, which the author describes as perhaps the most idiosyncratic of all theatre artists. He examines the ways of

working of a pair of noteworthy British actors, the language oriented style of John Gielgud and the intuition-oriented style of Paul Scofield, and comments on how the American Method style of acting ultimately relies upon the actor's subjective, learned and familiar truth (as opposed to sudden, unexpected, in-the moment manifestations of meaning). He concludes that the ideal training for an actor involves discovering each actor's idiosyncratic balance of learning from the structure of text and improvisationally manifesting sudden, raw meaning and/or truth—a combination that the author describes as a blend of detachment/objectivity and sincerity/subjectivity.

In the context of the entire book, this section comes the closest to becoming a how-to manual, a guide to creating theatre. Despite his initial disclaimers, the author's presentations here come across less as examples and more as suggestions of how to proceed. On one level, this takes place because the author, as he does throughout the book, defines the positive by contrasting it with the negative. For example, he recounts his experience going into rehearsal for his first play—how his hours of theoretical pre-planning came frustratingly to naught when he encountered the reality of actors in their infinite variety and idiosyncrasies. In other words, his theory is given practical weight by the presence of emotional experience. On another level, his examples evolve into suggestions because of the context in which they're presented—that is, the context of the book and its theories as a whole. Because the author so evidently believes in the power of roughness-based immediacy, and in the necessity of that immediacy for the creation of true, effective, enlightening theatre, his examples here in fact become urgings. For theatre to do what it must, and evolve in the way it must, theatre practice must evolve along the lines he proposes. He's very careful, it seems, to avoid total didacticism—saying that such-and-such an artist must practice in such-and-such a way. Nevertheless, his passion for both theatre as a concept and for the creation of theatre as a living, effective entity is so intense and so pervasive that the reader can't help feeling either instructed or pleaded with, or both.

The Immediate Theatre, part 2 (p 134 to 157)

The Immediate Theatre, part 2 (p 134 to 157) Summary and Analysis

The final section begins with an examination of the relationship between form and content and how they sometimes have to be examined together, sometimes separately; how examination of one can lead to insight into the other, and vice versa; and how the relationship between actor and director can lead to an understanding of the relationship between exterior representation (form) and interior meaning (content). Form is particularly useful in shaping content to convey meaning to an audience, which is the final phase of a theatre piece's development.

The true meaning of a theatre piece only becomes apparent when an audience is present and reacting. Audiences are unpredictable and the traditional habit of audiences leaving immediately after a play's final curtain does the play a disservice—meaning and reaction can only be discerned when an audience allows for a moment of transition from the world of the play into the world of life. He illustrates this point by describing an experience of theatre in an insane asylum, in which the patients were both performers and audience members. He describes the way that audiences and performers alike emerged from the experience having their anguish eased, perhaps only a little and perhaps only for a moment, but ultimately their experience of the world and of themselves is different. This, he goes on to say, is a universal standard by which the success of a piece of theatre can be measured.

The author gives a formula for creating and defining theatre. The first element is repetition; the second is representation, as in re-presentation, or presenting again, and the third element is assistance, or the life that an audience brings into the theatre every time a play is performed. But this formula, the author suggests, is useful only to a point because "Truth in the theatre is always on the move."

In the same way as the author's commentary on/analysis of the experience of voodoo (section four) comes close to becoming a description of theatre in general, his description of theatre in an insane asylum can be seen as functioning in the same way. The suggestion that life is an anguished experience might be perceived as a very existentialist, or even Buddhist perspective, but may be as well a fundamental human truth. The point is not made to suggest that human beings are, as individuals and/or as a society, insane (although Brecht might argue that there is nothing madder than society). But in the raw (rough?) experience of need for escape encountered by the author in the asylum, there are unavoidable echoes of the author's implied belief that humanity needs the (refuge? respite? enlightenment?) offered by immediate theatre—theatre that blends the "rough"-ness that gives rise to that need with the "holy" that there is meaning behind it all.

The final section sums up of the author's formula for creating successful, living, affecting theatre. However, why attempt to apply a formula at all, he seems to be saying, "if even in the moment of application the formula is becoming obsolete?" On another level, however, the formula can be seen as being applicable not only to theatre and not only to art, but to life in general. The one constant in human existence is change and any constant will eventually be altered or overturned. Truth in theatre is not the only truth that's on the move—truth in life, which of course theatre must draw upon in order to be truly immediate, is also on the move. It seems, therefore, that the best theatre can hope for is to capture the incandescent flare of a deeply experienced moment in the hopes that its candle-flicker of truth can show the way down the next in the endless variety shadowy, secretive, potentially joyous and potentially tragic paths traveled by every living human being.

Characters

The Author (Peter Brook)

In the 1960s and 70s, British theatre director and teacher Peter Brook was viewed, by theatre practitioners and audiences alike, as one of the most daring and innovative theatre artists in the world. His work directly, at times brazenly, challenged traditional ways of understanding, developing, and presenting theatre. One of his most famous productions was a staging of William Shakespeare's A Midsummer Night's Dream, in which there was no set (other than a stark white cube), no costuming (other than mostly white every day clothes), and an approach to the text that focused on the realism and transcendent humanism of its intent, rather than on its poetry. As he describes in this book, he also was one of the founding members of The Theatre of Cruelty, a company devoted to the exploration of impulse and visceral emotion as a (the?) means of communicating with an audience. At times, he de-emphasized text in favor of this focus on sensation and raw feeling. At other times, however, particularly when developing productions of plays by Shakespeare and Chekhov (see below), he emphasized text's capacity for triggering and/or manifesting sensation and rawness. His focus in The Empty Space is essentially on offering perspectives on what constitutes living, active, humanity-oriented theatre—theatre that engages and changes audiences and practitioners alike with its manifestations of perhaps unknown, or subconsciously known, existential truth. For Brook, theatre is activity, not the building in which that activity takes place. It is the illusion of reality triggering awareness (in both practitioner and audience) of transcendence and connection, of universality blended with individuality to create a fuller sense of how/what it is to be human, and why being human matters.

The Dramatist

The dramatist, or playwright, is for Brook the ultimate source of the creative impulse—it is the dramatist's interest in a particular aspect of humanity, and his/her skills at exploring and dramatizing that aspect of humanity, that brings a play into existence and that ultimately gives it its meaning. Brook is careful to make several points about what defines a good dramatist. Of primary concern, he suggests, is the ability to follow the example of Shakespeare and combining the visceral intensity of incidents as dramatized in the "rough" theatre with the more abstract, theoretical examinations of the meaning of those incidents as dramatized in the "holy" theatre. In other words, for Brook, the dramatist must have the ability (in terms of both talent and skill) to bring idealism to life. He adds that in his experience, the extent of this ability depends upon the dramatist's willingness and fearlessness to dig deeply into both his own inner resources and the reality of the world around him. This, Brook contends, enables the dramatist to create a sense of transcendent insight inspired by and connected to the truth of human existence, all shaped in such a way as to make it viscerally available to an audience.

The Audience

The audience is, for Brook, an indispensable component for the creation of effective, true theatre. It is the audience's intellectual and emotional presence that gives theatre its meaning and helps it fulfill its purpose—the act of communication, of creating a shared sense/broadened understanding of humanity.

The Director

The director, for Brook, is something of a priest—a guide for the spiritual exploration taking place in the theatre. S/he uses the text in the same way as a spiritual leader uses text like the Bible, the Koran, or the Torah to inspire him/herself and other spiritual seekers, actors, and audiences alike, to delve deeper into the truth of human existence.

The Actor

The actor is, in the theatre, the ultimate vessel through which understanding of/insight into humanity moves. S/he is a vehicle, perhaps the ultimate communicator, the embodiment of the dramatist's intent, the director's vision, and the audience's humanity.

The Critic

For Brook, the critic can in theory be as indispensable a participant in the effective creation of theatre as practitioners like the actor, the dramatist, and the director. Good critics, he contends, are capable of analyzing and understanding both the ever-evolving intent and purpose of theatre in general and the equally changeable intent of the practitioners striving to illuminate and manifest that purpose.

Antoine Artaud, Merce Cunningham, Samuel Beckett, Jerzy Grot

These four artists are contemporaries of the author whose work he cites as examples of ways in which the rough theatre strives to express something holy (see "Objects/Places—Rough Theatre" and "Holy Theatre"). Their work is portrayed by the author as functioning in an opposite way to that of Shakespeare and Chekhov (see below), in that their emphasis is on the rough—on the impulsive and instinctive as a source for spiritual truth.

William Shakespeare, Anton Chekhov

In contrast to the artists listed above, these two renowned playwrights (according to the author) develop and define their search for the holy in theatre with an emphasis on

structure, on text, and on form. The author contends that in their own way, these dramatists are as successful in creating a blend of rough and holy as the more contemporary artists listed above—the profound insights of Shakespeare and Chekhov, he contends, are equally as revelatory of human truth as their more impulsive, less shaped works.

Bertolt Brecht

This German playwright and director was, according to the author and to a significant number of theatre practitioners and critics, one of the most important theatrical innovators of the twentieth century, and perhaps of all time. His work strove to de-emphasize emotion and sentiment in favor of clear, specific, rationally presented (and commented upon) experience. His focus was on the relationship of individual humanity to a world defined by, in broad terms, a selfish lack of compassion for the individual. In Brecht's theatrical language, human truth was grounded in struggle for recognition, for safety, and for dignity—a struggle which, in his technique of presentation, could only be understood, not felt. Brecht's work was a call to awareness of the earthly (the rough), not a seeking of the spiritual (the holy).

John Gielgud, Paul Scofield

These two British actors are cited by the author in "The Immediate Theatre" as examples of how actors achieve the same goal (spiritual connection with both the truth of the play they're performing and the audience) through entirely different means. Gielgud, in Brook's experience, was intently focused on language and text, and was able to convey profound meaning by both the use of his voice and by a profound intellectual connection to the text's intent. Scofield, according to Brook, manifested similarly transcendent truths through careful, intuitively shaped portrayal of his personal emotional/spiritual experience. Brook's point in commenting upon the approaches of the two men is to suggest that ultimately it doesn't really matter what the means are, as long as theatre's end (the awakening of a new understanding of reality and human truth) is served.

Objects/Places

Theatre Space

Throughout the book, the author suggests that any space can be a place where theatre is performed—a luxuriously appointed/decorated Broadway or West End theatre, a church, a street-corner, or a bombed-out barn in Germany.

Theatre

Theatre as a concept, the author suggests, is in fact not about the building in which it's performed or even the play or the text. Theatre is defined by its purpose for existence, and by how that purpose manifests.

The Deadly Theatre

"Deadly" in this book is a euphemism for dull, meaning that "deadly theatre" is theatre in which an audience is a spectator, not a participant. "Deadly" theatre is theatre in which audiences and practitioners alike are essentially unmoved and/or unchanged by what's going on, and in which nothing new or insightful is evoked by what's being presented on the stage and/or absorbed by the audience.

The Holy Theatre

"Holy" in this book is a shorthand term to describe what is spiritual and transcendent in theatre, and is applied in relation to both the work of the theatre practitioner (dramatist, actor, director) and the theatre audience. The author implies that one of the subconscious longings that bring audiences to the theatre is the desire for the holy—to obtain even a glimpse of a spiritual truth that makes everyday life have at least some meaning.

The Rough Theatre

"Rough" theatre is defined by the author as theatre evoking the dirt, the mess, the confusion, the unpredictability and the instability of real life. Rough theatre, he contends, exists most effectively in theatre spaces outside of what might be described as traditional. Rough theatre is, in short, theatre of the people, by the people, for the people—as opposed to the holy, which is theatre of/by/about the spirit.

The Immediate Theatre

The author offers no simple, self-contained definition of "immediate" theatre, but throughout his essay on the subject, suggests that immediate theatre is theatre grounded in the rough and real while at the same time managing to convey a sense of the holy and transcendent. "Immediate" theatre, it seems, is completed by the presence and the involvement (emotional and spiritual) of the audience. It lives in the moment, with meaning emerging from the connection between action (on the stage, whatever form that stage may take) and audience.

The Cinema

The cinema, the author contends, is akin to the theatre in many ways, in that both present active narratives of the human experience. The main contrast between the two, he suggests, is that theatre is immediate—the human beings on the stage are living an experience. In film, he writes, the images are those of the past (see "section seven, Summary and Analysis").

The Theatre of Cruelty

This term is used by the author to identify a particular style of/approach to theatre he developed in association with French theatre artist Antoine Artaud. The purpose of "the Theatre of Cruelty" was to portray, as realistically as possible, visceral, unpredictable, sometimes shocking, yet always impulsive moments of being human. Theatre in "The Theatre of Cruelty" was almost always improvised, albeit after weeks of exercises in which actors were trained in the techniques of releasing and/or acting on their impulses.

The Happening

"The Happening" is portrayed as the building block out of which "theatre of cruelty" is constructed. It is an individual manifestation of the previously described impulsive moments of being human. In other words, "theatre of cruelty" consisted of several "happenings".

Alienation

Alienation is a term used to describe and define a particular style of theatre developed by German innovator Bertolt Brecht. Its intent was to separate (alienate) an audience from its emotional reactions to events being played out in the theatre and awaken in them a rational understanding of what it means to be a human being. Its particular emphasis was on the relationship between humanity and society; in other words, its aim was to trigger a rational understanding of being human in an irrational world.

Themes

The Nature and Purpose of Theatre

This is the book's core theme, and the focus of the author's analysis. His premise, put simply, is that theatre exists in order to wake humanity up to a fuller, more intimate, more immediate knowledge of itself in all its flaws and wonder. It's important to note that several times through the book he makes his point by referring to what theatre shouldn't be. Indeed, this is the premise of its first three essays, on the deadly, the holy, and the rough theatre. Good theatre, true theatre, valid theatre - all, the author maintains, are served only by theatre that eliminates the "Deadly", is inspired by the "Holy", and anchored emotionally and narratively by the "Rough". Theatre that is any of those three things alone, without any leavening from the other forms, is in the author's mind ultimately ineffective. The fourth essay, on the "Immediate" theatre, comes closest to presenting a specific, so-many-words delineation of the author's definition. This is that theatre must incorporate moments of raw, sudden emotion and sensation (the Rough) and a narrative quest for the transcendent and meaningful (the Holy) into a theatre that is in some ways familiar and safe enough (the Deadly) to make the audience accepting of truths they have hitherto been unable, or unwilling, to absorb. That moment of acceptance and understanding (the Immediate) is the moment in which theatre, in the author's opinion, is fulfilling both its nature and its purpose. Creating and defining such moments is the responsibility of the theatre artist.

The Responsibility of the Theatre Artist

This secondary theme is in fact a sub-theme of the first, in that the author devotes a great deal of literary time and attention to ways in which theatre artists (writers, actors, designers, directors and even critics) can and should fulfill theatre's purpose as defined above. As he did when defining that purpose, the author develops this theme throughout the book by examining a negative - in other words, by detailing what actors and directors and writers and critics shouldn't do, he creates a vivid sense of what they SHOULD. It's important to note here that for the most part, the author makes no distinction about which artist is more important. He does suggest that the theatre's purest creative impulse rests with the dramatist/writer, but adds that all theatre practitioners ultimately operate from the same purpose - to awaken an audience's emotional and intellectual sensibilities to new ways of experiencing the world and the life of that world. It's also important to note that the author, in contravention of what might be described as prevailing theatrical sensibility, includes the critic in his analysis of important theatre artists. Only the critic, he suggests, has the objectivity to determine whether other theatre practitioners are, by their efforts, fulfilling the nature and purpose of theatre. In other words, the dramatist, the actor, the director, and the designer are the ones who interpret the relationship between theatre and reality in order to fulfill theatre's purpose. Only the critic, the author contends, is able to and responsible for holding the

more interpretive artists to a standard of truth to that purpose, and integrity in their efforts to achieve it.

The Relationship between Theatre and Reality

In order to fulfill theatre's purpose, the author contends, all theatre practitioners (the critical and interpretive) must have an ever-expanding awareness not only of the nature of reality, but also of techniques for shaping interpretations and understandings of reality into a theatrical narrative that somehow conveys the meaning inherent in that expanded awareness to an audience. In other words, the author contends that simultaneously exploring and defining the relationship between theatre and reality is the core activity of all theatre practitioners as they strive to fulfill theatre's nature and purpose. He develops the theory that that key relationship can play out several ways. Some of these include, but are not limited to, manifesting a specific aspect of reality; triggering a deeper understanding in an audience of their particular relationship to reality, in any of its infinite aspects; presenting a completely different reality to that which the audience is used to. At the core of any/all these explorations, according to the author, is that on some level, in some way, the reality presented/explored in the theatre must be a manifestation of some kind of human truth. And with that, the author completes his thematic circle, for the search for human truth is, ultimately, the true nature and purpose of theatre's existence - and perhaps even of human existence in general.

Style

Perspective

As discussed in the "Important People" section, the author of this book (Peter Brook) was regarded by theatre practitioners of the time (the 1960s and 70s) as an innovator and a radical, an irreverent and deliberate debunker of theatre tradition. It could therefore be reasonably argued that in writing the essays that make up this book, on one level he is essentially offering an explanation (a justification?) of why he is who he is and why he does what he does. The point must be made that even on that level, the book is far from being academic; there is, in fact, the sense that the author feels deeply and passionately about theatre, and about why he does what he does. He's not a rule breaker for the sake of breaking rules, he breaks rules out of a desperate, seeking drive to make the best, most effective, truest kind of theatre he can. In that sense, the book can be seen as being written from a somewhat messianic perspective. The reader, who is clearly intended by the author to be a theatre practitioner him/herself, is being urged to look at theatre and its relationship to reality in a new and different way—not only to look at theatre, but to create theatre based on and inspired by this new perspective. In other words, the author clearly gives the impression of being on a mission, to transform theatre into an artistic entity that can, and will, transform its audience. How readers react to that message will, to some degree, depend on the individual perspective with which they read and understand the book—do they approach it with radical ideas of their own, or are they too tradition/habit bound to take Brook's essays as offered?

Tone

As previously discussed, The Empty Space is written with a barely restrained sense of passion for the subject, almost a desperation for a reader not only to accept the theories being presented, but to absorb them and adopt them as his or her own. It's an intriguing and effective blend of the subjective and the objective, in that the author seems determined to present rational, well researched and well considered arguments for his position, but can't help letting a pleading, personal quality seep into his words. This is not to say that the blend of dispassionate and personal is ineffective. On the contrary, the tonal quality of the book actually serves to reinforce its thematic premise that the truest, most effective theatre emerges from a blend of the "Rough" (passionate, personal, immediate) and the "Holy" (dispassionate, archetypal, transcendent) forms of theatre. The theatre practitioner who reads this book will inevitably find him/herself described, at least on some level, in these pages. What side of the argument (passionate/dispassionate, rough/holy, immediate/transcendent) s/he finds her/himself on will depend on how s/he reacts to the author's tone. Someone who shares Brook's perspective will no doubt be cheering him on, nodding in agreement at every page. Someone with a more traditional perspective might find him/herself swayed, at least to some degree, by both Brook's intellectual argument and his passion—it's doubtful, however, that such a reader would become inclined to rush out and change everything

about the way s/he works. Ultimately, however, Brook's tone is so reasonable and so persuasive that anyone who reads the book, theatre practitioner or not, will come away from it believing that at the very least the author truly believes in and feels what he's saying.

Structure

The book is separated into four clearly defined sections, the result of it having been compiled from a collection of essays written and presented by the author. There is movement through these sections from a discussion of theatre that, in blunt terms, has nothing going for it (the Deadly), through discussion of theatrical forms that have good aspects that have, over time, become liabilities (the Holy, the Rough). This movement culminates in a discussion of the theatre form that, in its utilization of the best of all three, is for the author the ultimate in effective theatre (the Immediate). In that sense, then, the book is well structured as it leads the reader through a carefully thought out and articulately presented thesis. There is the lingering sense, however, that the book's divisions are somewhat arbitrary and artificial—that while the ideas and themes seem to flow smoothly towards an inevitable conclusion, the divisions between the four forms of theatre aren't as rigid, or even as clear, as those between the essays. In other words, the book's structure gives the impression that theatre can, and perhaps should, be easily slotted into one of the four categories. The reality, as defined by the author himself at several points throughout the book, is that the lines between the four sorts of theatre are, more often than not, blurred and indistinct—there is, for example, any "Deadly" theatre that doesn't at least make some attempt at portraying, or exploring the "Holy", the "Rough", or the "Immediate". Conversely, only the quite rare piece of theatre can be described as fully "Immediate" without having some of the "Deadly" about it. Ultimately, the structural divisions of the book are, while useful to a degree, more arbitrary than organic . . . more "Deadly" than "Immediate", in spite of the fact that throughout the essays the author writes with a definite sense of "Rough" passion, in pursuit of a "Holy" goal.

Quotes

"A word does not start as a word - it is an end product which begins as an impulse, stimulated by attitude and behavior which dictates the need for expression. This process occurs inside the dramatist; it is repeated inside the actor." p 15

"In the theatre, every form once born is mortal; every form must be reconceived, and its new conception will bear the marks of all the influences that surround it." p. 19

"Time after time I have worked with actors who ... are tragically incapable, however hard they try, of laying down for one brief instant even in rehearsal the image of themselves that has hardened round an inner emptiness." p. 33

"[t]he vital critic is the critic who has clearly formulated for himself what the theatre could be - and who is bold enough to throw this formula into jeopardy each time he participates in a theatrical event." p. 37

"The author has been forced to make a virtue of his specialness, and to turn his literariness into a crutch for a self-importance that in his heart he knows is not justified by his work." p. 38

"We are all aware that most of life escapes our senses: a most powerful explanation of the various arts is that they talk of patterns which we can only begin to recognize when they manifest themselves as rhythms or shapes." p. 47

"[Beckett] forges his merciless 'no' out of a longing for 'yes' and so his despair is the negative from which the contour of its opposite can be drawn." p. 65

"[a] beautiful place may never bring about explosion of life, while a haphazard hall may be a tremendous meeting place; this is the mystery of the theatre, but in the understanding of this mystery lies the only possibility of ordering it into a science." p. 73.

"[p]utting over something in rough conditions is like a revolution, for anything that comes to hand can be turned into a weapon . . ." p. 74

"[b]y nature the popular theatre is anti-authoritarian, anti-traditional, anti-pomp, anti-pretense. This is the theatre of noise, and the theatre of noise is the theatre of applause." p. 76

"When the theatre comes closest to reflecting a truth in society, it now reflects more the wish for change than the conviction that this change can be brought about in a certain way." p. 94.

"It is through the unreconciled opposition of Rough and Holy, through an atonal screech of absolutely unsympathetic keys that we get the disturbing and the unforgettable

impressions of [Shakespeare's] plays. It is because the contradictions are so strong that they burn on us so deeply." p. 96

"[t]he pressures of a first night, with its unmistakable demands, produce that working-together, that dedication, that energy and that consideration of each other's needs that governments despair of ever evoking outside wars." p. 110

"In the other arts, it is possible for the artist to use as his principle the idea that he works for himself ... he will say that his best guide is his own instinct ... in the theatre this is modified by the fact that ... until an audience is present the object is not complete ..." p. 142.

"When emotion and argument are harnessed to a wish from the audience to see more clearly into itself - then something in the mind burns ... it is the play's central image that remains, its silhouette, and if the elements are highly blended this silhouette will be its meaning, this shape will be the essence of what it has to say." p. 152.

Topics for Discussion

Consider the quote on p. 94 in relation to today's contemporary theatre. In that context is the statement true or false? In what ways does the statement about "the wish for change" apply/not apply to society in general? In what ways can/does theatre (particularly the so-called "rough" theatre) contribute to the possibility for societal change? Or is it even possible for theatre, even the rough theatre, to do so?

Consider the author's definition of theatre as presented in Section One of "The Deadly Theatre" in terms of your own life. What daily experiences might constitute theatre, according to that definition? Discuss how the emotional connection between seer and seen in such day-to-day circumstances might be explored, deepened, and/or amplified in theatre that takes place under more conventional circumstances (i.e., on a stage).

Discuss ways in which the author's definitions of theatre, its flaws and its strengths, might be applied to other, non-theatrical forms of art—music, painting, sculpture, writing, film. Relate these definitions to specific examples, both theoretical and practical, from other artistic disciplines.

Debate the author's contention, discussed in section two of "The Deadly Theatre", that the critic is as much a practitioner of theatre, and has as much responsibility for its ongoing evolution, as other practitioners (actors, directors, writers). Do you agree or disagree? Why or why not? What do you perceive as the critic's responsibility, not only in terms of theatre, but in terms of art in general?

Within the context of the author's definition of "Holy Theatre" (sections three and four), discuss the nature and purpose of ritual. What are some aspects of contemporary life/culture that might be described as rituals? What is the deeper spiritual, psychological and/or archetypal truth explored by each ritual? In what way are contemporary rituals transmuted into forms of theatre; that is, experiences in which both participant and audience become aware of those archetypal truths?

Create and develop a theatrical experience in a way that utilizes both Brechtian and Shakespearean techniques. Strive for a blend of emotional truth, connection to spiritual exploration, and intellectual/objective portrayal of a societal condition.

Take a play you already know, or have studied. Analyze its characters, situations, and story. Define its central thematic premise, the human truth that speaks most clearly and thoroughly to you as an artist and/or your society in general. Use that thematic premise, along with your analysis, as the basis for a contemporary, immediate, theatrical retelling of that story.